

Whiteness Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty

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Introduction:

- ~ It takes a great deal of work to maintain Canada, the United States, Hawai’I, New Zealand, and Australia as white possessions.
- ~ The regulatory mechanisms of these nation–states are extremely busy reaffirming and reproducing this possessiveness through a process of perpetual Indigenous dispossession, ranging from the refusal of Indigenous sovereignty to overregulated piecemeal concessions.

“THE PROBLEM WITH WHITE PEOPLE IS THEY THINK AND BEHAVE LIKE THEY OWN EVERYTHING”
-DENNIS BENJAMIN MORETON
(PERSONAL COMMUNICATION, APRIL 10, 2005)

Moreton–Robinson felt it was appropriate to start her book by using a quote from her uncle, Gami. This helped encapsulate what she wanted to communicate through her book.

WHITE POSSESSION:

- ~ Whiteness confers certain privileges to those whose skin colour represents sameness.
- ~ Not unmarked, unnamed, or invisible; it is hypervisible
- ~ Signs of white possession have been embedded everywhere in the landscape.

BEING PROPERTY:

- ~ Governments dehumanized Indigenous peoples in order to legitimize their dispossession of Indigenous peoples lands and resources and then sought to make them “fully human” by exercising benevolence and virtue in its many forms.
- ~ Virtue functions as a usable property to dispossess Indigenous peoples from the ground of moral value. This is important as it means white people have the ability to seize the land and are able to do it from a position of moral virtue.
- ~ Virtue functions within the ontology of possession that occurs through the imposition of sovereign will to–be on Indigenous lands and peoples, which are perceived to lack will; thus, they are open to being possessed.
- ~ The ability to be possessed enables sovereignty to lay claim to own Indigenous lands and peoples because “wilful possession of what was previously a will–less thing” is constitutive of its ontology.
- ~ The state’s assertion that it owns the land becomes part of normative behaviour, rules of interaction, and social engagement embodied by its citizens.

REFERENCES:

Moreton–Robinson, A. (2015). The white possessive: Property, power, and indigenous sovereignty. University of Minnesota press.
doi:<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/lib/uvic/reader.action?docID=2051599&ppg=12>

TERMINOLOGY:

- ~ Possessive Logics: Used to denote a mode of rationalization that is underpinned by an excessive desire to invest in reproducing and reaffirming the nation–state’s ownership, control, and domination.
- ~ White Possessive Logics: Are operationalized within discourse to circulate sets of meanings about ownership of the nation, as part of common–sense knowledge, decision making, and socially produced conventions.
- ~ Race: Race is socially constructed. Also, race shapes the law’s possessiveness.
- ~ Terra Nullius: A European legal fiction which dispossessed Indigeous peoples of their lands (Land belonging to no one).
- ~ Possession: Within the law, this term can refer to holding or occupying territory with or without actual ownership or a thing possessed, such as property or wealth, and it can also refer to territorial domination of a state.

OWNING PROPERTY:

- ~ By the late 1700s, white people could legally enter into different kinds of contractual arrangements whereby they could own land, sell their labour, and possess their identities, all of which were formed through their relationship to capital and the state.
- ~ Private ownership of property, both tangible and intangible, operated through mechanisms of the new nation–state in its regulation of the population and especially through the law.
- ~ Slaves were brought to America as the property of white people to work the land that was appropriated from Native American nations.
- ~ Whiteness constitutes the norm operating within various institutions, influencing decision making and defining itself by what it is not. It is socially constructed and is a form of property that one possesses, invests in, and profits from.

BECOMING PROPERTYLESS:

- ~ Indigenous people have never been recognized as property–owning subjects in their own right as Indigenous peoples in Australian law, and this continues in current law and policy.
- ~ At an ontological and epistemological level, the Crown and subsequent governments have treated Indigenous peoples as their property.
- ~ Indigenous peoples have been represented within popular and legal discourse as not owning anything, not even their bodies; they are propertyless.

(AILEEN MORETON- ROBINSON, 2015)